

## A WINTER OF RARE BIRDS AT OTTAWA, ONTARIO.

BY G. EIFRIG.

THE winter of 1908-9 will long be a memorable one to ornithologists of Ottawa and vicinity. In the long winters of this section birds are usually conspicuous only by their absence, save when an incursion of Pine Grosbeaks, Canada Jays or Snowy Owls occurs which is not too often. But during last winter birds were about, not only in greater number of individuals than before, but also in greater variety, and these various species contained some of the rarest of our North American birds. Nor did these usually very restless sojourners from the far north and west only afford us a passing glimpse of their interesting selves, but they lingered for an unheard-of length of time. Thus they afforded one an excellent chance for observing them and their habits, etc., better than usually falls to the lot of bird observers. Therefore the writer considers the event important enough to chronicle it in 'The Auk.'

Already in the fall there were auguries, that led one to expect things "to happen" in the bird line during the winter. Many flocks of White-winged Crossbills (*Loxia leucoptera*) were whirling over the fields and fallows around the city — the first time in six years that they were observed by me. November 2 the first King Eiders (*Somateria spectabilis*) that had ever been taken here, were secured (Auk, XXVI, 59), an occurrence which was repeated on December 2 and 3, only that greater numbers came. The Brünnich's Murre (*Uria lomvia*) which had up to the time of writing the article that appeared in the January number of the current volume of 'The Auk' not showed themselves, did so to the number of about 500 on December 19, and five more the next day, three of which I received from a gunner. In this connection I would correct an erroneous impression I may have conveyed by the italicizing in the article referred to above the word "eaten," conveying the meaning, which I really held at that time, that the flesh of the *U. lomvia* must be very rank, therefore poor eating, implying thereby that the French-Canadian rivermen who eat them, must either have a ravenous appetite or very poor taste for what is good eating and what not. To determine for myself, I had one of those three

Murres prepared like a wild duck, and I must say that the flesh was very good, in taste much like a wild duck. It must be borne in mind, however, that when the Murres reach here they are very lean, entirely without fat, which probably would spoil their taste.

Although the coming of the Murres is a matter of interest to ornithologists, who are thus urged to probe for the reason that these birds leave their salt water home to certain doom inland — for none return — it does not thrill one in the same manner that the coming of the beautiful and also mysterious comers from the far north does, about which I had intended to write. To begin with the first. On December 13 a flock of about 30 Bohemian Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrula*) took up their quarters in a residential portion of the city, where the streets are lined with fine shade trees, by which also many houses are surrounded, and among which are many mountain ash or rowan trees (*Sorbus americana*). For the first few days they stayed in some trees near the Carnegie Library, and then shifted to another corner where there was one little tree. Here they stayed till the tree was completely stripped of berries. There were other rowan trees close by, larger and several together, but the berries on this tree must have been so much more to their taste that they would not move, the small tree was partly over the side-walk and one could watch them at close range. Like the Cedarbirds (*B. cedrorum*) they are voracious eaters, so much so that they are usually very silent, taking no time for giving vent to a few notes. However, sometimes they do this, uttering some subdued, very sweet notes in rapid succession, like a string of beads, much like the Cedarbirds. Their manner of eating rowan berries differs from that of the Pine Grosbeaks (*Pinicola enucleator*), which are also very fond of these berries and were often with the Waxwings. The Grosbeaks pick off the berry, crush it, and *suck out the seeds*, ejecting the pulp of the berry. The seed is what they are after. But the Waxwings eat the complete berry, wherefore there was next to no debris under the trees where they were at work, which is always very conspicuous where Grosbeaks are feeding. During the first weeks of their stay they allowed one to approach them to within five to six feet, but later on they became more wary, and if people stood under their trees they took wing to some nearby larger trees. After cleaning that one little tree, they divided up

into smaller bands, one of which cleaned a large rowan tree on Queen Street, near the busiest section of the city, the Pine Grosbeaks, however, helping them assiduously. On February 26, I saw them in an old orchard adjoining the grounds of a fine residence in the same part of the city. Here they had discovered the old apples clinging to the trees and were busily eating those. It was a scene not soon to be forgotten. There was bright sunshine above, glistening snow below, in the trees the birds, showing their delicate tints, the chestnut under tail coverts, the red and yellow tips on the wings; with them a great number of Pine Grosbeaks, engaged similarly, and finally a *Robin*. But more of that later on. They remained until about March 4, thus giving us over two and a half months of their presence, a longer time than I ever have seen reported from any city. Three specimens, two males and a female, were secured for me. When comparing these with others taken out west, and formerly taken here, I was struck by the prevailing dark color of the under and upper parts; there is also much less of the light fawn color about the head. I noticed the same thing on specimens taken at Kingston, Ontario, where they had also been common, but for a much shorter time.

To make things more interesting, a flock of about twenty Evening Grosbeaks (*Hesperiphona vespertina*) came to our city on February 7, and liked it so well that they stayed until May 15, again an unprecedented case, so far as the writer is aware, for any city from which records have been published. Like the Waxwings, they did not show the least fear of man and took up their abode right in the city, in the same section. As early as November 4 Mr. Wm. McComber, a farmer of Bouchette, Quebec, 60 miles north of Ottawa, had seen and taken a single individual of this species. But here we had a whole flock, fine males and some young and females, right in the city, also allowing close scrutiny. While the Waxwings were so very partial to rowan berries, these Grosbeaks fell into the Manitoba maple trees (*Acer negundo*) and never strayed far away from the chosen one till all its samaras were stripped off. It was indeed an unusual and pretty sight to see these fine birds right between houses, sometimes alighting on their roofs and eating snow, or hopping about on the ground below for the same purpose. Several times they were also seen in mountain ash trees, eating

berries. They were noisier than the Waxwings, frequently uttering loud call notes and little warbles. The former had much of the quality of those of the English Sparrow mixed with the tone-quality of those of the Robin; the latter reminded one still more strongly of the Robin's song. After the trees at their first station were stripped, they roamed more about the city, being seen in several places, but from time to time they would come back to the first place, as though they liked it best. Then they disappeared from the city and it was thought they had left us entirely, but in April they were rediscovered in a small woods near the city limits, which is composed of ash, elm, and white pine trees. It was hoped that some might take it into their head to breed, but they were no longer seen after May 15, thus staying here over three months. Three specimens were secured for the writer, one adult male, a female and a young male. An analysis of the stomach-contents made at Washington showed in one, seeds of sumac 8 percent, seeds or rather cotyledons of some species of ash (*Fraxinus*) 92 percent; in the other two only the ash cotyledons. As they were shot from ash-leaved maple trees (*Acer negundo*), this seems remarkable. The adult of this species also is much darker than other specimens in collections examined and compared by the writer.

The Pine Grosbeaks (*Pinicola enucleator*) also favored us with their presence in greater numbers and for a longer time than they do usually. At times, near that old orchard referred to above, there were about fifty in sight. The greater number are always females and young. In a flock of about ten, one may expect to find one to three bright colored males. But, as in everything, these birds are eccentric also in this respect; some flocks are composed entirely of females and young, and some again of only old males. They are very greedy feeders. One that I kept in a cage for a day, from the moment he was brought in, devoured, practically all the time, the rowan berries provided for him, not minding the new surroundings and the people watching him in the least. Indeed, they are so intent on feeding, that boys often catch them by slipping a horse hair noose over their heads. In a short time the litter from the berries covered the ground below every mountain ash tree. Often when seeing this, and looking up, one will find a flock busily eating above him, which he would otherwise not have suspected of being

there, so noiseless are they. Beside rowan berries, they are also fond of eating old apples, sumac berries, buds of maple, larch and pine trees, and this year, because they stayed so long, they finally turned to the litter of the rowan berries, which they had earlier discarded. The first flocks arrived here November 5, and the last were seen March 21. A flock of these birds on some evergreen trees, especially if there are some bright males among them, is, when the sun shines brightly, a pretty sight, such as I had on March 8 on the Experimental Farm. The stomachs of six sent to Washington contained seeds of *Rubus*, conifers, *Vaccinium*, ash, and buds of several trees, in varying proportions in the different stomachs.

In still greater numbers than the Pine Grosbeaks were present the lively little Redpolls (*Acanthis linaria*). Although they are also very erratic in their comings and goings, they may always be expected here with some regularity each fall and spring, even if in varying numbers and of varying length of stay. So there were many flocks here in the fall (1908), when the *Loxia leucoptera* also were here. Then they disappeared for a while to reappear about January 24. Each day for a while added fresh flocks to their numbers until they were very plentiful all over the city and the outskirts. Often they would be seen in the company of English Sparrows in vacant lots and waste places busily picking off the seeds from tall weeds that were protruding from the snow; at other times they were with the Pine Grosbeaks on and below the trees, eating the debris of the rowan berries. From about April 10 large flocks were roaming about the outskirts of the city, sometimes in such numbers that over quite an area every branch and twig on every tree and bush held one or more of them. A strange excitement seems to take hold of them; they will then sometimes nearly alight on one's head, like a flock that whirled about me on April 15. Mr. Bedard, the rifle-range keeper, during three weeks about this time daily saw large flocks, some of which he estimated at 2000 birds. And many of these flocks flew in a *southerly* direction! The last ones seen here left us on May 9. At times they are very tame, allowing close approach, at others, very shy. Sometimes they whirl about like Snow Buntings, but usually their manner of flight and their notes are identical with those of the Goldfinch. They are very fond of the seed of the various species of birch, where some

could always be found. On January 24 Mr. E. White saw three of the rare Hoary Redpolls (*L. hornemanni exilipes*) in his garden.

That some at least of the White-winged Crossbills had stayed near the city for the winter was proven on February 8, when Mr. H. Grob made a Northern Shrike (*Lanius borealis*) give up its prey, which it was just eating, and which proved to be a Crossbill of this kind.

One of the greatest surprises, however, was the wintering here of a small flock of four or five Robins (*Planesticus migratorius*). Already about December 20 they were seen near the Parliament building, but they were looked upon as belated fall migrants, who certainly would not think of staying here over the winter. Imagine the surprise of Ottawans in general when in January these birds suddenly took up headquarters in the trees around the city hall, where their well-known call notes greeted passersby and made them wonder momentarily, whether or not the seasons had suddenly been shifted. They were often with Pine Grosbeaks feeding on the rowan berries. Although the winter of 1908-9 was an unusually mild one for Ottawa, these poor birds must have suffered a great deal. One was seen after a while with a frozen leg and all seemed to have disappeared before the first real spring arrivals of their kind came. No doubt, they were frozen to death by one of the few short cold spells which occurred during the winter, when the thermometer went down to about  $-16^{\circ}$ . It may perhaps be also worthy of note, that our Robins here, which are extremely plentiful in the city and increasing in numbers, are perceptibly larger than those that live further south.

Also in producing freaks the last winter was a record-breaker. Several albino English Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) which, by the way, are here starting to cultivate the habit of migration, were seen, as well as partial albinos, which, according to the distribution of the white patches over the plumage, show very odd effects. The greatest rarity, however, in the sparrow line was seen by the writer on January 19 when he, on the main street, at the noon hour, when the street was thronged with vehicles and pedestrians, saw in a flock of English Sparrows a beautiful red one. There was no mistake, he was nearly at my feet, as fearless as his fellows, behaving and feeding the same way. Nor was the red over only a small area or



of an indistinct hue, but very bright and general. Below the red was that of a male Pine Grosbeak and above like that of an American Crossbill. The wings and tail were like the common English Sparrow's, as were also the size and shape. The bird was twice seen afterwards by interested people.

Finally, a Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) was seen January 10 on the rifle-range, a fact quite as unusual as the wintering here of the Robins.

It is clear from the foregoing that we were unusually well supplied with birds during last winter. Yet it is safe to say that the same or a similar combination of birds, from the north and south, will probably not be seen for many years to come. It is clear to the writer that the meteorological conditions of last winter must have been very abnormal, hence these unusual wanderings and stayings of birds. In fact, indications seem conclusive to me, that many birds seem to be shifting their range of distribution, as witness the coming in here for the first time of birds like the Grasshopper Sparrow, Prairie Warbler, King Eider, etc.

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## TWO NEW SUBSPECIES OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS.

BY LOUIS B. BISHOP, M. D.

### *Numenius americanus parvus* subsp. nov.

#### CANADIAN CURLEW.

*Type*.— ♂ adult, No. 15743. Coll. of Louis B. Bishop; Crane Lake, Saskatchewan, June 23, 1906; L. B. B.

*Subspecific characters*.— Smaller than *N. a. americanus*, with much shorter bill.

*Summer range*.— Eastern British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, south to eastern Washington, Wyoming, and South Dakota.

*Measurements of type*.— Length, 19.19; extent 36.00; wing, 10.19; tail, 4.48; exposed culmen, 4.15; tarsus, 2.92 inches.

For some years I have been confident that the Long-billed Curlew of western Canada was subspecifically distinct from the